

**STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS OF  
1981 AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE  
UNIVERSITY OF PRISHTINA****History****Keywords:** University, Kosovo, demonstrations, Communist League, political differentiation, etc.**Avni Rexha****Abstract**

Under the pretext of difficult living and studying conditions a demonstration of Albanian students at the University of Prishtina broke out in March 1981. Within a short time, social demands were transformed into political claims for the Republic of Kosovo within the Yugoslav federation. These claims met a strong backlash by Serbian and Yugoslav communist circles, while the Kosovar political class was divided over the issue. Considering these claims as "directed against the system, the state and the people", Serbian political circles seized the opportunity to attack the Albanian political and intellectual class with the ultimate aim of destroying the University of Prishtina, which they regarded as "the cradle of Albanian nationalism and separatism". Therefore, this paper claims to elaborate the course of events, the attitude of the political circles of the time and the measures they took in the fight against Kosovo Albanian intelligentsia, or to reflect the consequences or results of such claims.

**Introduction**

In the early 80's, students at the University of Prishtina were overwhelmed by insufficient study space and conditions, lack of textbooks and teaching aids, inadequate dormitory conditions, and particularly, poor food quality at the canteen. Since the previous student complaints about the last issue had been ignored by the University governing authorities, on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1981, at about 19:00hrs, during the dinner, a student threw the food tray in disgust. A riot broke out; about 30 students took the streets after damaging the canteen and soon a crowd of 400 people was formed. They confronted police on their way downtown and ten students were injured. Anyway, the law enforcement managed to repel students who returned to their dorms, excluding a small group that remained outside until the early hours in the morning chanting patriotic songs. In order to prevent any kind of deterioration the University management staff talked to the students about the way to improve studying and living conditions.<sup>1</sup>

The student demonstrations of March 11, 1981 in Prishtina caused disruption amongst the communist leadership of Kosovo. Part of it, headed by Mahmut Bakalli, maintained the idea that "*the dissatisfaction was the core of the demonstrations*", describing it as social in character, while the other wing with Fadil Hoxha, Ali Shukriu and Azem Vlasi, had an opposite assessment. According to the latter, the main purpose of the demonstrations was not the social aspect of the students, but rather behind them were hidden "*hostile elements coming from positions of Albanian nationalism and irredentist*".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1981 Demonstratat e Kosovës në Arkivin Kombëtar të Londrës, Përmbledhje me dokumente përgatitur nga Sabit Sylja dhe Hamit Kaba, Instituti i Historisë, Prishtinë, 2017, p. 78-79.

<sup>2</sup> Çështja shqiptare në RSFJ 1981-1990, Përmbledhje dokumentesh përgatitur nga Qerim Lita, Shkup: Shoqata e historianëve shqiptarë në Republikën e Maqedonisë, 2014, p. 55.

The demonstrations of March 11<sup>th</sup> had caused a deep concern in Belgrade as well, which was manifested through the urgent meeting of the Federal Council the day after the demonstrations. The Council came to the conclusion that "the student standard was not the main cause of the demonstrations, but it was a hostile action". This assessment was backed by the Presidency of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and it was transmitted by the Tanjug news agency as the first official stance of the Yugoslav leadership.<sup>3</sup>

After dispersal of demonstrations, the situation in Kosovo, despite the tensions, was calm until the last days of March 1981, when the demonstrations resumed. In the morning of March 26<sup>th</sup> 1981, a group of students achieved to organize a crowd of hundreds of students in the dormitories. This crowd met with the Rector to talk about the studying conditions, but he interrupted the talks as soon as the students began submitting political requests. This marked the moment when the social or student demands were transformed into political claims, particularly when demonstrators raised ready-made flags and loudly chanted political slogans. The other objective of students was to obstruct the manifestation of the Youth Relay that had to pass through Prishtina that day.<sup>4</sup>

Political demands condemned the discriminating status of Albanians in Yugoslavia and at the same time presented the level of courage achieved by the youth to express this sentiment openly. The citizens of Kosovo sought equal status with other people of Yugoslavia: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, Bosnians and Montenegrins. This equality should be achieved through the status of the Republic of Kosovo. The slogan for the Republic would be the driving force of the popular movement.

By the end of March, demonstrations were spread in other cities of Kosovo, particularly in Prizren, Peja and Gjakova; some faculties of the University of Prishtina boycotted the teaching. But unlike the March claims, the demonstrations held in the early days of April clarified their political character. At this time, the demonstrators established their organizing Committee. Due to security reasons the members of the Committee operated illegally and very few people were aware about its existence. In addition to diverse informative and organizational activities the Committee drafted a list of slogans to be used during the demonstrations, as: "We want our schools back", "We ask for a job, we need food", "Down the social differences", "Down the exploitation of Kosovo", "Equality". "Republic", "We seek to unify all Albanian lands in one republic", "There is no peace without freedom", etc. The number of demonstrators was increasing daily, and according to Tanjug, the demonstrations of April 1<sup>st</sup> were attended by 15,000 demonstrators.<sup>5</sup>

But unlike the early March, the broader mass of people: intellectuals, workers, miners, craftsmen, farmers, etc., joined the students at the demonstrations held in the late March and early

<sup>3</sup> Op.cit., p.56.

<sup>4</sup> 1981, *Demonstratat e Kosovës në ...*, p.79.

<sup>5</sup> *Çështja shqiptare në RSFJ 1981-1990...*, pp.57-58.

April. As a conclusion the demonstrations that took place during the late March and early April were nationwide.<sup>6</sup>

The support to students not only marked a political solidarity towards reaching common goals, but also marked a social and parental support to them. Police violence, resulting with 23 injured students, irritated masses. "We don't want our children get beaten by non-Kosovan police officers" – was a slogan that expressed such an anger about the federal police units.<sup>7</sup>

In the early April demonstrations were spread in other cities of Kosovo such as Podujevo, Vushtrri, Lipjan, Glogoc, Gjakova, etc. In addition to the severe police violence, student demands and demonstrations met a serious political backlash that was manifested after the students' political demands. The slogans that emerged from the latest March demonstrations in early April urged federal, republican and provincial political structures to describe these events as a hostile and anti-Yugoslav, directed against constitutional order and national coexistence. The demonstrators were described as counter-revolutionaries, nationalists and irredentists. The political structures were backed by the Belgrade daily and periodical press, especially the Politika and NIN newspapers, which carried out a vicious anti-Albanian campaign. The front pages and pages of these newspapers contained headlines and texts that poisoned the Yugoslav public opinion with anti-Albanian attitudes; in particular they wrote that Albanians did not want to live with other Yugoslav people and sought reunification with Albania. The headlines of NIN magazines described student demands: "We want a republic of Kosovo", "We are Albanians and not Yugoslavs", "We seek a Greater Albania", "Kosovo-Kosovars", "Long live Marxism-Leninism", and "Down with revisionism".<sup>8</sup>

In response to Albanian demonstrations and demands, Yugoslavian political circles, influenced by Serbs, drafted a series of counter-plans. Thus, a joint meeting of the SFRY leadership, held on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1981 in Belgrade, came to the conclusion that "a crisis situation has occurred in Prishtina" and as a result the extraordinary measures have to be undertaken. Therefore, the SFRY Presidency issued an order to Yugoslavian Army to surround and secure public facilities and institutions in Prishtina.<sup>9</sup>

According to a secret document, brought to us by researcher Qerim Lita, over 3,500 police officers from all over Yugoslavia and two Army divisions were stationed in Prishtina and they were ready to operate under a secret project called "Rubin". The document further stated that during the action carried out between April 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> the Yugoslav military police "killed eight demonstrators, injured 75, arrested 807 people, carried out an accelerated investigation procedure against 28 people, and fined 698 people".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.56.

<sup>7</sup> 1981, *Demonstratat e Kosovës në ...*, pp.42-79.

<sup>8</sup> Gazeta NIN, Beograd, 12 prill 1981.

<sup>9</sup> *Çështja shqiptare në RSFJ 1981-1990...*, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.62.

After the brutal suppression of the demonstrations, thousands of citizens, in particular students and lecturers, were subject of diverse punitive measures; the University of Prishtina was described as "the cradle of Albanian nationalism and irredentism".<sup>11</sup>

This period also marked the beginning of the collapse of the University of Prishtina, after ten years of its establishment. From March 1981 until the academic year 1990-1991, numerous measures were taken by Serbia and its representatives in Prishtina to degrade or even close down the University of Prishtina.<sup>12</sup>

Political leaders and intellectuals in Serbia made the most of the events of 1981 in Kosovo. Through public and covert Serbian nationalism, Serbian political leaders "found" the 1974 Constitution, which they believed gave many rights to Albanians, guilty of the events in Kosovo. Serbian science and public opinion began with generalized accusations against the Albanian people, especially against intellectuals, the education system and the University of Prishtina. The demonstrations gave the opportunity to Serbian nationalist circles to activate a policy stemming from the 1977 Blue Book Program, which represented the first step of Serbian expansionism in the Balkans. According to this Program the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina should be cancelled and transformed into Serbian regions.<sup>13</sup>

The Albanian intellectual elite was a target of persecution. People close to Belgrade's stances, such as HalitTernovci, head of the Albanian Language Department in Belgrade, said that the intellectual elite was a root of problems in Kosovo; when assessing the problems in Kosovo the Central Committee of Yugoslav Communist Party came to the conclusion that the core goal of demonstrations was to secede Kosovo from Serbia or Yugoslavia and that the "enemy" achieved to recruit "a certain number of intellectuals, student and youth". According to this assessment, wrong policy was pursued in Kosovo and that it had to be more closely linked to Serbia and the whole of Yugoslavia. Ideological work and investments in Kosovo were required to return security, which was deemed fragile.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to destroying Albanian intelligentsia, another immediate goal of Serbian nationalist circles was the interruption of cultural or educational cooperation or contacts between Kosovo and Albania. It sought to halt further educational emancipation of the Albanian population in Kosovo. In fact, this had been an early target of these circles but there were not enough pretexts to hinder it, and now with the idea that students were indoctrinated by literature and lecturers coming from Albania, they launched a vicious campaign to try to terminate this cooperation.

<sup>11</sup> Gazeta *NIN*, Beograd, 7 qershor 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Bajram Shatri, *Arsimi Shqip në Kosovë 1990-1999*, Libri Shkollor, Prishtinë, 2010, p.566.

<sup>13</sup> Abdullah Bytyçi, *Terrori shtetëror dhe gjenocidi serbo-malazias 1878-1991*, Prishtinë, 2009, p.123.

<sup>14</sup> Op.cit., p.121.

In the wake of these efforts, the 1979 Cooperation Agreement<sup>15</sup> between the University of Tirana and the University of Prishtina was subjected to a double expertise, which was entitled as

"The Critical Analysis about the Cooperation between Prishtina and Tirana University". This assessment was supervised by Dr. S. Unkovic (later rector of the University of Belgrade and Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia).<sup>16</sup>

Other activities followed to stop cooperation between Albanians on both sides of the border. At a meeting held on April 21st 1981, a federal commission that was evaluating events in Kosovo called for these measures to be taken:

- A complete prohibition of any further engagement of lecturers from Albania in the University of Prishtina, as well as in other schools, or the diminishing number of them, in addition to the implementation of inevitable political and security control;

- Prohibiting or reducing to the maximum the use of literature coming from Albania, in addition to the implementation of its content statement;

- Definition and understanding of cooperation in the field of education, culture, sport and tourism, and other areas between the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Albania; besides the inability to use those forms of cooperation for nationalist or irredentist purposes.<sup>17</sup>

These proposals marked a clear warning that the Kosovo Albanian political structure, after some dismissals and exclusions from the Communist Party, did what it was required to do, firmly condemned the "counter-revolution" and undertook to fight evil at the root: education. All school and university curricula were reviewed, Albanian "romantic" literature was excluded from the education.<sup>18</sup> Allegations of co-operation with Albania in the area of education were spread, professors and books from Albania were accused of propaganda among Kosovo Albanian students. Moreover, according to Yugoslav officials, it was estimated that some 20,000 immigrants from Albania and Yugoslavia to the West were willing to engage in more extreme, terrorist actions against Yugoslav institutions.<sup>19</sup>

Very stringent measures were taken against students, dropping them out of the study process, or preventing them from enrolling in higher schools or faculties on the grounds that they, or any member of their family, were not politically fit. The other forms of degrade the university were: differentiation of the university teaching staff, their dismissal from leading positions in the

<sup>15</sup> Universiteti i Prishtinës, *Tempulli i Dijës*, Monografi, 1970-2012, Prishtinë, 2012, p.226.

<sup>16</sup> Minir Dushi, *Universiteti i Kosovës (1981-1983)*, Universiteti i Prishtinës, Prishtinë, 2004, pp.195-196.

<sup>17</sup> *Çështja shqiptare në RSFJ 1981-1990...*, p.167.

<sup>18</sup> Metais Serge, *Histori e shqiptarëve nga Ilirët deri te Pavarësia e Kosovës*, Tiranë, 2006, p.349.

<sup>19</sup> *Agjencia e lajmeve Tanjug*, Shqipëria e Enver Hoxhës, Beograd, 1981, p.104.

faculties and rectors, dismissal from their jobs, or the replacement of jobs on the grounds that they had an impact on indoctrination of student and youth, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Pressure on Albanian higher education in Kosovo continued during and after 1981. A specific pressure was addressed towards the changing of educational policy. At the same time police repression against lecturers and students was intensified.

The extent of repression was described in an article of Vjesnik newspaper. According to her, up to June 8<sup>th</sup> 1981, 506 persons, mostly students, were punished for violating public order. Out of this number 287 were charged of participating in demonstrations, 38 of attempting to organize demonstrations, 46 drafting hostile banners, 104 for having a hostile stance or as direct "organizers" of the demonstrations, 39 persons as being members of illegal organizations, etc.<sup>21</sup>

Pressures of all kinds resulted in the resignation of the leadership of the University of Prishtina in June 1981. The then Rector, Professor Gazmed Zajmi, had stated that he was resigning "for reasons of conscience and a sense of responsibility for the general situation at and about the University".<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Under the pretext of dissatisfaction with life and studying conditions a revolt of Albanian students broke in March 1981. The social demands for better living and studying conditions would be transformed into a political claim for the formation of the Republic of Kosovo within the Yugoslav federation and equalization with other peoples of Yugoslavia. All classes of the Kosovo Albanian population joined the students. But Yugoslavian political circles opposed and called that such claims were directed against the state and common life of the people of Yugoslavia. In order to prevent the achievement of Albanian claims, the Yugoslav / Serbian political circles of the time designed various projects, which were mainly based on the degradation and demolition of the University of Prishtina, which was described as "the cradle of Albanian nationalism and separatism". A fierce campaign of political differentiation and of the dismissal of professors and students, was launched. However, the main focus was put on disrupting cooperation between the University of Prishtina and Tirana, preventing the use of literature coming from Albania, etc. Although the repercussions of Serbian repression were severe for the University of Prishtina in particular and for the Albanian people in general, the 1981 demonstrations were not an accident in Kosovo's history. They were a continuation of the movement for freedom and independence of the Albanian people in Kosovo that resulted in the realization of the centuries-old Albanian struggle: the freedom and independence of the Republic of Kosovo proclaimed in February 2008.

<sup>20</sup> B. Shatri, *Arsimi shqip në Kosovë 1990-1999...*, p.567.

<sup>21</sup> *Gazeta Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 10 qershor 1981.

<sup>22</sup> Op.cit., p.71.

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